

THE CHRISTMAS GUEST

BY KENNETH IRVING BROWN

THERE are times when new scenes pall and strange faces affright, when a man yearns for his home and the companionship of his friends. I had reached such a state of mind after four months in South America, during which I had ravaged the Guianas, Venezuela, and Colombia in search of flora for my botanical museum. My collection was complete except for a specimen of the *Cocos comosa*, and I was loath to leave the country until I had secured it. All of my search for it had been fruitless. As a final endeavor, I set out with Pedro, a native Carib guide whom I engaged at Cartagena, down the Gulf of Darien to the mouth of the Mulatto River, and up the Mulatto into the Colombian wilderness, hoping that here at last I might find that *rara avis*.

I lay back in the native dugout, lost in pleasant thoughts of home and a land where Nature was tamed. Pedro, between the lazy strokes of his paddle, had told me, in a lingo of distorted English and incomprehensible Spanish, of Cispattia, a tiny Carib town inland on the Mulatto which he knew, of the villagers' 'heart warmness,' which I interpreted to mean hospitality, and of their isolation. If I understood him correctly, no white man had visited them for twenty years. I smiled to myself at the thought of the fright I should cause them with my pale complexion — pale in comparison, in spite of the tanning of the sun — and my American clothes, for the town was ahead and we should be there by nightfall.

'And this is the day before Christ-

mas,' I mused half aloud. 'We shall spend our Christmas Eve at Cispattia; I shall be their Christmas guest.'

The thought was ironical, and I smiled bitterly. Pedro smiled in return; I doubt if he understood my words, but his sympathy and good nature were apparent.

The Mulatto is a sluggish stream, mud-brown, with a current whose movement is barely perceptible. High luxuriant tropic-growth lines both sides of the winding river, vegetation in fulsome abundance, and yet its very voluptuousness suggests stagnation. The air seemed heavy with that stillness, that impenetrable calm, which is so characteristic of the Southern lands. The sun rose high and glared with fury; passed meridian splendor and slowly sank. Pedro paddled on leisurely; the great muscles of his bare black back moved with lazy regularity. For a long time neither of us spoke; the silence was broken only by the shrill calling of some wild bird in the palm trees.

It was approaching twilight — the twilight of Christmas Eve — when the camp enclosure of Cispattia came into view. From the coast the river had meandered willfully and vagrantly; each turn had revealed a new turn only a few rods ahead; but when the tiny village came into sight the stream ran in a straight course for several hundred yards, as if, near this oasis in the midst of yawning stretches of forest land, its conduct must be circumspect.

The first view of the enclosure was not prepossessing. The village consisted

of a score or more of small huts with their novel grass-roofs, many of them built on stilts for protection against the attack of wild animals. An area of some two or three acres, containing the buildings, was surrounded on three sides by a high wooden stockade and on the fourth by the river. There was only one man visible: an old father, bent low with age. His grizzled hair fell over his misshapen back like an enveloping cloak, and his beard reached to his knees.

He espied us and stood as if rooted to the spot, staring intently at us. Then with a wild shout, such as I have never heard from beast or human being, he cried: '*Hombres, hombres! Venid!*' and straightway running from the huts came men and women. They stopped abruptly when they saw us; with one accord they fell upon their knees and bowed their faces in the dust, all the while making a rhythmic moan, uncanny at first, and then strangely harmonious and beautiful.

I knew not what to make of this strange performance and my guide offered no information. Our canoe came nearer and as it hugged the bank I stepped ashore. Not a person stood, nor even peered at me through half-closed eyes; evidently that which I had taken for a moan was a prayer.

'Can you give a night's lodging to a weary traveler?' I asked.

The old man I had first seen raised himself on his knees and extended his arms to me, but he uttered not a word.

'They no speak English,' my guide said.

'Tell them we want to spend the night here,' I answered.

He turned to them with my message, and no sooner had he spoken than their prayer—if such it was—ceased, and they rushed toward me. In no human eye have I ever seen expressed such a wildness of emotion as was written

in theirs—amazement, fear, childish simplicity, and passion. They seemed to be searching for something in me, some special quality, for their eyes scanned my face with a hunger and avidity quite disconcerting. When I raised my arms to them to signify that I would be their friend, they fell at my feet; one even kissed my sandals and another my trousers.

When a second time my guide explained that we would spend the night with them, their delight was pitiful, and one and all ran to the largest of the several huts to make ready my bed.

The entire performance was incomprehensible to me. The hamlet's reputation for hospitality, of which Pedro had told me, failed to explain their strange actions; even amazement at the presence of a white man hardly accounted for their apparent worship. I recalled stories from grammar-school readers of Romans who were taken to be gods when they were cast shipwrecked upon an unknown shore; but I laughed aloud. Did they take me for an Olympian? How far was an academically sheltered botanist from qualifying as a relative of Jupiter and Juno! Rather this must be their way of paying respect to the white man's superiority.

The ancient Carib chieftain, the old man whom we had seen on the shore, came forward and bowed us to a bench before a narrow table near the steps of the main hut. We seated ourselves, — Pedro and I, — but our host was troubled. He made strange motions to my guide, and then came to whisper something in his ear. Pedro rose solemnly and, with a gaze half of regret and half of reverence, moved to another table, leaving me alone. Then the *muchachas* brought the food; but while they served Pedro, all the dishes intended for me were given to my host, who himself served me. Although I dared not attempt to thank him in my meagre

Spanish, I tried to show him by smile and friendly nod that I appreciated his generosity. The dishes set before me were many and, to a wayfaring man, delicious: a soup of beef, fried plantains, and a roasted bull-steak. I was hungry and ate greedily. When I had finished I strolled down to the bank of the little stream and sat in wonder, while the shadows of twilight thickened, and the matted growth across the river, higher than the height of a man, assumed strange forms as it swayed in the gentle night breezes.

I could see the *hombres* and *mujeres* in the distance. They were talking in soft low tones. Suddenly from the group I saw a figure emerge. It was one of the *muchachas*, young and slender, but she walked with difficulty, leaning heavily upon a staff at each step. She was partially shrouded in the dusk, so that I could not see her distinctly, but as she drew nearer I thought her left side was paralyzed. Her foot dragged as a leaden weight, and her arm hung useless. She came forward alone, stumbling and with visible hesitation. No one moved among the group in the background, and yet I could see they were watching her intently. What could it mean?

The young girl was too much in earnest to be acting a part in any heathen ceremonial. She was trembling violently and now I could see that she was coming toward me. I rose, wondering what was expected of me, and even as I did she stumbled. Her staff fell from her hand and she pitched forward, her right arm stretched out for help. I caught her easily, and held her trembling body for a moment. Eyes like the eyes of a young lioness when first entrapped — soft, yearning, wondering, before she knows the cruelty of her position — met mine in a look which years of scientific training had brought me no means of understanding. Then,

with a cry of ecstasy, the young thing leaped from my arms and flew back to the shadows. As if waiting for this moment, her friends raised their voices with hers and there arose on the night air a solemn chanting, crude and unmusical, yet beautiful in its absolute sincerity and resplendent in its recurring note of joy. I watched, listening, and waited, longing to know the secret of the mystery.

The *muchacha's* staff lay at my feet. Could it be that these poor people, hearing of our progress in medicine, believed in the white man's miraculous power to heal? Faith is the ability to believe the incredible, I had heard it said. Was this the solution?

I did not see my guide again that night. I was so astounded at what had taken place, and so disconcerted by the plaintive chanting, that I hurried to absent myself and made signs to my host that I would retire. He understood and led me to the hut, where they had prepared a spreading of fresh palm-leaves with a blanket covering, — the choicest sleeping-accommodation the camp offered, I knew, — and I accepted with a gracious heart.

I was weary from my journey, and the cool night air brought refreshing sleep. It was dawn when I awoke.

Christmas Day — yet how unbelievable! What was Christmas Day in a land of wilderness and black folk? What could it mean to these dark-skinned Carib Indians? Not even a name, I suspected, to them who would worship a white man as they would a god, who instinctively bowed before a stranger from the fairyland of success.

It was with a feeling of wretchedness and discontent that I recalled the past Christmases, and knew that for the love of leaves and grass I had deprived myself of another such exquisite pleasure. My thoughts were willful truants: a jolly Christmas Day; outside, the

ground white with snow, inside, the tree bulging with gifts and tempting eatables; the children were probably shouting as they opened their presents, and their mother — she too was lonely, even as I was lonely, for she had expected me to return before the holiday season. And all for a *Cocos comosa*.

The dream was dispelled as I became conscious of the voices which had awakened me, harsh and untuneful, even as the night before, yet they stirred something within me which quieted the loneliness of my heart. I bethought me of the old Christmas minstrels — but the very unlikeness of their carols to the present crying caused me to smile. I rose from my pallet; there about the hut were gathered the inhabitants of the camp, with their arms laden. At sight of me they bowed themselves to the ground; then slowly one by one they came and laid their offerings at my feet. I stood as a man in a dream, insensible to what was going on. I looked for my guide to explain, but Pedro was nowhere near. At the foot of my ladder were heaped great skins of tiger and lynx, bananas and plantains, curiously carved images, and a reed basket woven in intricate design and filled with stone charms. In my amazement I wondered if this were my Christmas dream come true!

I did my best to express my thanks by smiles and gestures, and the natives appeared to understand, but my confusion was turning to puzzled incredulity. I wanted to get away from it all; I wanted to question my guide. Was this Cispatia's tribute to civilization and nothing more?

They brought me food, when I had thanked them as best I could; and when I had eaten I sought my guide.

'Pedro, we must away.'

He looked at me in awe and surprise. '*Hoy, Señor?*'

'Yes, to-day; at once.'

He acquiesced and went to my host with word that we were going. The old man hurried to my side and through Pedro and pantomime begged me to stay. Then, seeing I was resolute, he motioned me to remain for a moment while he called the villagers together.

They came quickly, for at no time did they seem to be far away, and, grouping themselves about me, they fell on their knees. My host stood before me, and by frantic gesticulation, spreading his hands out in front of him, endeavored to communicate an idea to me, but I could not understand. I turned to Pedro for assistance.

'Bless,' he said.

They wanted me to bless them. I, an old, homesick, botany professor, with theological notions too vague or too radical to be bound by creed or formula, was called upon to bless this little community which had housed me in the best of their homes! I lifted my hands and, with eyes raised to Heaven, I repeated over them the words which came to my mind from childhood days, like a voice heard from afar: '*The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.*' Then, turning to my companion, I entered the dug-out, and we pushed off.

Pedro took his place at the fore and began to paddle with his long, lazy strokes. By a turn in the stream the tiny enclosure was soon lost to sight.

'Pedro, what did it all mean?'

He looked at me with eyes filled with amazement and doubt. 'You know.'

'I don't know; tell me.'

He hesitated, but something in my face must have warned him that I wanted an answer, for at last he spoke.

'Christ come.'

No white man ever uttered such words with deeper reverence.

'Christ come!' I echoed, as I remembered their greeting and the incident of the night before.

'Yes, old miss'nary tell — Christ come. He come day 'fore Christmas; come up river at shade-time in dugout with hombre. He stay all night at Cispatia. They know at Cispatia.'

I sat stunned by the thought. This then was the reason for their reception and their gifts: this the reason for the muchacha's confidence.

It was an idea which made me tremble. How inconceivable their childish faith, how perfect their adoration! And I had taken their homage as a white man's due!

Very, very silent I sat, awed and oppressed by an overburdening sense of impotence. If only the King might have come to receive His Christmas tribute!

The canoe moved on. The tall grasses rustled in the breeze; in the distance I heard music. It was the solemn chant they had sung for me when I came; they were singing it again as I left them. Clear, sometimes shrill, ever tuneless, and yet motivated by a strangely recurring theme of joy, it came to me on the morning air. Fainter and fainter it grew, as the recessional fades in the anteroom of the cathedral; then the hushed pause, silence, and that sense of unutterable loneliness, of loss, even as when a star falls from the heavens and the light of the world seems dimmed.

Pedro leaned toward me.

'It is true, *no es verdad?* You are, you are — He?'

A WOMAN'S MEMORIES AT EIGHTY-ONE

THEIR LESSONS IN PATIENCE, SERVICE, AND HOPE

I HAVE seen: —

The Irish famine of 1848. The rise of Fenianism. Gladstone and Home Rule defeated. Parnell and defeat. The Great War and delay.

Then, result of all: the Irish Free State, and the Irish Free State represented at Washington.

The European Revolutions of 1848.

France from a Republic to an Empire, passing through the Commune to the Republic.

The rise and fall of Prussia.

The birth of a new Germany and a new Russia.

A United Italy.

Emancipation of the Russian serf.

The Indian Mutiny and the consequent taking-over of India from

'John Company' (the East India Company) by the British Government.

The legislation of Lord Ripon. The later Montagu Act. The beginning of the modern process of India toward a self-governing community. The entrance of the Indian Princes into the World War as voluntary contribution and their publicly expressed reasons for so doing.

England, from a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, becoming under Disraeli an Empire; now, 'A Commonwealth of Free Nations.'

A peasant's son, MacDonald, Prime Minister.

The great series of Factory Acts; the protection of women and children in industry and mining.